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Civilian Rescue Mission

Even months ago Rick Seymour was confronted with a problem: his wife's brother, a 21-year-old Iranian college student, had been marked for execution by the Ayatollah Khomeini's agents. Seymour, a salesman for a communications firm in Houston, says he tried unsuccessfully to secure political asylum or refugee status for the youth. So last fall the former Green Beret, who had worked as a test pilot in Iran, brought his brother-in-law and five other dissidents out of Iran on his own in a daring private rescue mission.

Seymour refuses to reveal details that might corroborate his story, because he says he fears reprisals against other relatives in Iran. But U.S. officials and Iranian exile leaders say his tale is completely plausible: an estimated 1.5 million Iranians have fled Khomeini's regime since the 1979 revolution. Anti-Khomeini Kurdish tribesmen have smuggled thousands

over treacherous mountain passes into neighboring countries, sometimes for hefty fees. Crossed mostly at night, the Iranian borders are fairly porous; much of the border guard itself is controlled by Kurds. But escaping through neighboring countries can be treacherous indeed, exiles say, since the refugees often fall victim to corrupt local officials seeking to extort whatever they can.

Seymour says Turkey was his brother-in-law's only realistic escape route. "Had he

been caught in Iraq," he says, "his name would have gotten back to Iran. Then the government would have retaliated against other members of the family." Pakistan was out of the question because "the logistics would have been a nightmare." But Turkey was also problematic. Turkish diplomats and U.S. State Department officials told Seymour he should surrender his brother-in-law to officials in Turkey and take his chances on political asylum. But then, Seymour says, "low-ranking Turkish military people might have sold him back to the Iranian government."

The Package: Seymour says he planned the mission with the help of a friend at the Central Intelligence Agency who gave him the names of three contacts in Istanbul: a Turkish businessman, an exiled SAVAK colonel and a member of the Turkish underworld. (The CIA refuses to comment on such matters.) Meanwhile,

Seymour's wife called her father in Iran and arranged for him to deliver "the package" to "Abdul," a code name for one of Seymour's Kurdish friends. Later, Seymour phoned his father-in-law with instructions to tell Abdul to "take the package to where Hussein once took you." Hussein was Seymour's Persian name, and he had occasionally taken his Kurdish friends for helicopter rides. On one occasion, he took them to visit relatives near Rezaiyeh,

near the Turkish border.

Seymour flew to Istanbul on Nov. 18, and from there traveled to Van in southeastern Turkey. Then he drove a Mercedes minibus to within six miles of the Iranian border, and walked for 12 hours until he reached the arranged meeting place on Nov. 22. His brother-in-law was there—but to Seymour's surprise, so were five other young Iranians. Four wanted to escape military service, and one was considered to be a political enemy of the Khomeini regime. Abdul beseeched Seymour to take them along. "Seven people in a group is fairly conspicuous," Seymour says, but he believed he had no choice. Armed with

modern weapons supplied by the Kurds—including an UZI submachine gun—the group traveled on horseback to the Turkish border.

Then they walked across undetected.

Once in Van, they were stopped by a Turkish policeman. "He asked to see our papers," Seymour says. "I handed him my passport and visa along with a \$20 bill. He took the money and let us go." From Van, the group flew to Istanbul, where Seymour tried to obtain exit papers: "All we had were these atrocious documents that a three-year-old could have spotted [as phony]." He bought an Iranian passport on the black market for his brother-in-law, and a British Consulate official helped him obtain a British visa. Seymour says he arranged to have the five other Iranians smuggled into Frankfurt by truck for \$10,000—"the same way illegal aliens are smuggled into this



Khomeini



Seymour at map: Reprisals

MANUEL CHAVEZ—HOUSTON POST

country." His brother-in-law flew to England on Nov. 30, and arrived in the United States late in December.

Cost: Seymour refuses to reveal how his brother-in-law entered the United States or provide other details of the mission. Some Iran exiles questioned whether the passage through Turkey could have been so easy—and wondered whether Seymour in fact made steep payments to highly placed police, intelligence or Army officials for their cooperation. Seymour admits the mission cost \$25,000 of his own money. But he says, "I wouldn't have attempted it if I didn't think the ends justified the means." He also says he plans to make a second trip this spring to bring another relative out of Iran.

MELINDA BECK with
DANIEL SHAPIRO in Houston